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Leading from the Classroom:

The impact of the assistant
headteacher in primary schools

To what extent have assistant headteachers contributed to the leadership of primary schools? What has been the rationale for the appointment of assistant headteachers in primary schools? What leadership activities are assistant headteachers involved in and what impact has this had in their schools?

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Introduction

This research aimed to explore the extent to which assistant headteachers (AHT) have contributed to the leadership of primary schools.

Nationally, leadership groups were introduced in September 2000 and a new post of assistant headteacher was created. The research identified the rationale for the appointment of assistant headteachers, examined the variety of leadership activity (rather than management activity) that they have been involved in and sought to discover the impact that this has had in their schools. The research was conducted over a period of four months.

There were 15 schools in the study ranging in size from 160 to 660 pupils in suburban, inner city, ring estate, market town and small village settings. Some served areas of social deprivation, some served affluent homes with many social advantages and some catered for a mixture of both. Most of the assistant headteachers in the study were full-time class teachers.

A logbook was kept over the period and headteachers or their assistant heads (and in some cases both) recorded the leadership activity that the AHT had been involved in. At the end of this period, headteachers reported back to one of the three focus groups that were established to confirm the interpretation of data and to make judgements about the impact the appointment of the assistant headteacher had made in their school.

Main findings

- Assistant headteachers are playing a significant role in school leadership.
- Assistant headteachers have been appointed to schools of all sizes.
- Assistant headteachers are often effective leaders because they are exemplary practitioners with credibility and can empathise with colleagues.
- Schools have adopted creative and flexible leadership groups suited to their own circumstances but able to respond to new challenges.
- The appointment of assistant headteachers has enhanced the capacity for leadership in the school. Their skills, knowledge and expertise are often used to make a significant contribution to school improvement.

- Not all assistant headteachers are aspiring to headship.
- Many assistant headteachers do not have sufficient non-contact time for them to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

Leadership group structures

Some of the schools in the study were adapting their staffing structures to respond to the changes they were encountering and the challenges they were facing. There was some staffing turbulence even within the short period of the research.

There was a variety of responses to staffing options. It seems that some heads and governors have a strong preference for flatter, less hierarchical structures. In these schools, leadership groups are established with a head and one or two assistant headteachers but without a deputy at all. In these cases there are questions about the act of deputising. A distinction must be made between covering for the head, deputising and acting as head. Each carries a different weight of responsibility, decision-making and legality.

All of the AHTs in this study had been appointed internally.

Roles and responsibilities

The assistant headteachers in the sample had a variety of strengths, interests and prior experience. Their role within the school was customised to meet both the needs of the school and the capabilities of the individuals.

The assistant heads were contributing to the overall leadership of their schools in a variety of ways. The logbooks revealed a range of activity external to their classroom:

- strategic and operational planning
- promoting curriculum development
- quality assurance activity
- encouraging the professional development of staff
- giving professional support
- observing teaching
- coaching
- building relationships

- enabling others
- dealing with staffing issues
- involvement in pastoral issues
- improving the learning environment
- dealing with health and safety matters
- extra-curricular activities
- analysing school data
- target setting

The list is an aggregation of the activity reported. The collection of leadership activity covers 11 weeks, or approximately one quarter of the academic year. Some activity is 'seasonal', ie it only happens at a particular time of year.

The assistant headteachers exercised their leadership skills continuously in the many contacts and interactions they had during the school day. The predominant leadership activities recorded were professional development and support. It was clear that their effectiveness as leaders was based upon the esteem in which their colleagues held them.

It was not possible in such a short time span to measure the impact that the assistant headteachers had in their schools. However, it is clear that they were making a significant contribution. The range of leadership activity displayed in this relatively small sample of primary schools was impressive.

Influence and impact

The evidence is that AHTs are especially effective because they are exemplary practitioners. They have credibility with colleagues and exercise empathy and understanding. They are well placed to drive forward initiatives and influence changes. This process is two-way. In their role as intermediary they represent the views of colleagues in discussions with the headteacher.

Professional development

This action research created opportunities for professional development. In discussing the role of the assistant headteacher, the headteachers engaged in lively debate about school leadership and school improvement. Frank and honest disclosures about their leadership teams, job descriptions, rates of pay and strategy led to shared understandings. Meetings between headteachers and assistant headteachers to reflect on the entries in the logbooks provided both with valuable feedback that became a useful form of appraisal.

Non-contact time

The knowledge, skills and values of the assistant headteachers have increased the leadership capacity of their schools. However, it is astonishing how the assistant headteachers are able to do as much as they do with such little non-contact time. At least one half-day per week release from class teaching would seem a fair and appropriate allocation of time, but too much release time could become counter productive since assistant heads gain much of their authority from their status as expert practitioners.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the headteachers and their assistant heads who participated in the research. Their enthusiastic support, dedication and professionalism were a source of inspiration. It was a pleasure meeting and working with them.

Bournebrook C of E Primary School, Fillongley, Warwickshire; Brocks Hill Primary School, Oadby, Leicester; Brookhill Leys Junior School, Eastwood, Nottinghamshire; Camp Hill Primary School, Nuneaton, Warwickshire; English Martyrs Primary School, Rugby, Warwickshire; Greenfield Primary School, Countesthorpe, Leicestershire; Heymann Primary School, West Bridgford, Nottingham; Kirkby Woodhouse Primary School, Kirkby-in-Ashfield, Nottinghamshire; Sawley Infant and Nursery School, Sawley, Derbyshire; Shipston-on-Stour Primary School, Shipston-on-Stour, Warwickshire; Stafford Leys Primary School, Stafford Leys, Leicester; Swallowdale Primary School, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire; The National C of E Junior School, Grantham, Lincolnshire; Tysoe C of E Primary School, Tysoe, Warwickshire; Wembrook Primary School, Nuneaton, Warwickshire.

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